

# CHIP expansion OK'd

By MIKE DENNISON - IR State Bureau - 01/18/07

HELENA — A bill allowing more kids to be covered by the government-funded Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) won easy approval from a Senate committee Wednesday.

The Senate Public Health Committee voted 7-2 for Senate Bill 22, which expanded the eligibility for the 7-year-old program that currently covers about 13,100 children in low- and moderate-income families.

"With 20 percent of Montanans without health insurance, I would like us to work on many fronts to make sure people have health insurance," said the bill's sponsor, Sen. Dan Weinberg, D-Whitefish.

SB22 now advances to the full Senate for debate and a vote, most likely later this week.

The panel also increased the breadth of the bill before approving it.

Under current law, children are eligible for coverage by CHIP if their family's annual income does not exceed 150 percent of the federal poverty level. That's \$30,000 for a family of four.

The original version of SB22 increased that income ceiling to 165 percent of the federal poverty level. On Wednesday, a majority of the committee agreed to increase that ceiling to 175 percent of the poverty level, or \$35,000 a year for a family of four.

Weinberg said he talked to state Budget Director David Ewer about the change, and that Ewer said the Schweitzer administration is "comfortable" with it.

CHIP is funded by the state and federal government, which provides about 80 percent of the money. Weinberg said expansion of the program also would depend on how much money is available from Congress in the coming years.

He noted that U.S. Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., has said that federal funds should be allocated to finance CHIP for children whose families earn up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Baucus is the new chairman of the powerful Senate Finance Committee.

When asked how SB22 might fare in the Republican-controlled Montana House, Weinberg said it's difficult to predict.

However, he said he thinks CHIP and Insure Montana, a new program that helps small businesses buy health insurance for their employees, are two "wildly successful and popular" programs addressing the problem of the uninsured in Montana.

"If the people in this building are truly representing their constituents, they would be inclined to vote for (CHIP expansion)," Weinberg said. "If you're against insuring kids, I'd like to know what you're for. It's something that I think is extremely important."